

Eyes Open. Eyes Closed. (a.k.a. Traitor)

Choreographed & performed by Venuri Perera

My Mother and I

Choreographed & performed by Chey Chankethya

1 September 2015 | 8pm | SOTA Studio Theatre

Reviewed by Keoy Wan Hui

A Contemporary Defiance

As we exercise the free will of our bodies unthinkingly, choreographers Venuri Perera and Chey Chankethya cause us to a pause and contemplate this given. Both dances examine recent politically repressive regimes that have affected their culture and the choreography served as a timely reminder of the freedoms we enjoy. While Perera's *Eyes Open. Eyes Closed.* teases our sense of sight, egging us to rethink our perceptions. Chey Chankethya incorporates the idea of having a voice... who allows us to speak? Through an intriguing sensory experience, the double bill, looks at how lives and progress has been stifled or undermined by immediate socio-political realities.

In cultural anonymity, Venuri Perera lurches across the space in slow motion, toes pointed towards the ceiling and her hips robotically jerking to reflect a discomfort within the body. After a series of commands calling upon the audience to open and close their eyes, Perera conjures a myriad of exacting, unnerving images of tension and resistance. She astutely posits the body's vulnerabilities: the profuse slapping of herself, the uncontrollable flailing of her legs, the violent wrestle between her two arms locked behind her back and the disturbing hysteria of her banging her head savagely against the floor (or so it seems). Even the enlarged projection of an eye on an upended table that transforms into lips makes a bold statement against how we perceive sensuality in modern times.

As a humanoid voice reverberates with "Are you happy?" one shudders to think how contrived our lives might be while watching Perera's final delirium – innocently giggling one moment then gnawing at her fist the next. Implicating the audience as her accomplices, Perera masterfully unveils how we tread within our extremities, pushing the frontiers of how we see or are made to see.

While the audience grapples with the temptations of peeking and the power to disobey in *Eyes Open. Eyes Closed.*, Chey Chankethya subverts this freedom entirely. Vivaciously singing a traditional Cambodian song, she imitates her mother, hunched towards the floodlights with a pointed finger trembling at the audience. Donned in a fashion forward garment of unassuming grey, Chankethya deviated from the usual ornate embroidery of traditional Cambodian costumes. Still, she wove an intricate tapestry of past and present that expatiates the political oppression faced through the generations.

Recounting her mother and master's stories Chanktheya meanders across the space in modest steps with graceful gesturing of her wrists. Her poised body and subdued elegance recalls the enthralling beauty of classical Cambodian dance, Khmer. Yet, the momentarily interjections of her mothers' reprimanding echoes reveal the tyranny of a conservative society still deeply entrenched in tradition and decimated by war.

Making plain the realities of despotism as she banter between the personas of her mothers and herself, an overwrought conflict took shape within the physical body. The indelible victimization of the individual was further augmented with the autocratic voiceover: "To destroy you is no loss. To preserve you is no gain."

Chanktheya's sustained resilience to revolt against this tumult is admirable. Even as she 'loses' her voice, she breaks into a contemporary defiance – swift slides across the floor, repetitious arms sweeping the air and dodging spasms to redress the unspoken suffering of people. In this millennial, we carry the weight of the past and shoulder the hefty responsibility of the future. How can we reconcile them? Liberating from the prescribed composure of Khmer, but still to the tunes of traditional Cambodian music, Chanktheya returned to where she began; she regains a full, relaxed autonomy of her own body.

